

News Release

By: Indigenous Peoples Organisations at the Press Conference held at Imperial Mall in Miri at 11.00 a.m. today (9th August 2009).

Subject: Malaysian Indigenous Peoples want moratorium on plantations, other extractive projects.

MIRI, SARAWAK, Malaysia (9 August 2009)

Today is the World Indigenous Peoples Day declared by the United Nations General Assembly under resolution 49/214 in 1994. In commemorating this significant day, we, the representatives of the Malaysians indigenous peoples stand with a united voice, have come up with this press statement as below:

WE, the Indigenous Peoples Organisations, are calling on our respective State governments to stop large-scale plantations and other extractive activities on our customary lands until effective measures to safeguard our rights and the environment are in place.

Over the past decades, our indigenous communities have faced a turbulent survival as a result of our forest being continuously exploited by the timber companies. Logging have destroyed our fundamental existence to livelihood, the plant varieties including medicinal plants, animals and fish have either become threatened or extinct. The bulldozed forests cannot be planted with crops as the soil is compacted and disturbed; crop harvests are reduced and rivers on which the people depend on for water becomes polluted. Forest produce becomes scarce and threatens the survival of the people who have depended on it for hundreds of years.

In Sarawak, our communities are yet to face the worse in the near future. As the sun sets on the timber industry in Sarawak, the current state government is energetically seeking to diversify and broaden its revenue base via land development for oil palm plantations and large-scale trees plantations. These land development activities has time and again encroached into the lands and forests of various indigenous communities' which claim native customary rights (NCR) over these territories.

The state government considers all NCR land as 'idle land' and because of this there is a need to develop these lands for large-scale commercialisation, and bring the native communities into mainstream society in order to alleviate their poverty. This argument was used to promote logging in the 1970s and is now used to justify the introduction of oil palm plantations and industrial tree plantations.

After more than three (3) decades of extensive logging and deforestation, why is it that most of our people living in the interior are now worse off than before. Generally, the politicians paint a picture that logging and plantation schemes "upgrade the standard of living and income of the native communities in the affected areas."

We are in great doubts and question the reigning "development paradigm," the idea that these large-scale projects are always beneficial to the indigenous communities. In reality, the indigenous and local community by and large do not benefit from these activities that destroy the resources on their land. The reality is that such projects generate large profits for a small number of people, the elites and the corporations; they also bring social and environmental devastation to the country, and beyond.

We are also deeply concern that the State government of Sarawak has issued licenses for planted forest plantation over as large as 1,397,644 hectares. This still does not include oil palm plantation. Some of these forest plantation estates are established within the native customary rights land areas, water catchment areas of the communities. With the water catchment damaged or destroyed, the communities are no longer able to get clean water. The rivers would be polluted with chemicals and silt that washed down from the forest plantation estates.

As to highlight this, recently Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation (STIDC) and a timber company, KTS Holdings Sdn. Bhd formed a joint venture company to develop a 267,000 hectare forest plantation in the state. The joint venture company, PUSAKA-KTS Forests Plantation Sdn. Bhd. have identified three plantation areas, there are Belaga, Kakus and Tutoh in the Kapit, Bintulu and Miri Divisions respectively. Their forest plantation area once established in the state, would affect a lot of areas under native customary land. It is not clear how much of the native population are affected by their forest plantation projects.

We are calling specifically for the Sarawak government to stop the arbitrary issuance of provisional leases to any private companies for the purpose of plantation development projects. We have received numerous complaints from the communities that their customary land areas have been affected by the provisional leases. The plantation companies that have been given the provisional leases have encroached illegally into the customary lands of the indigenous communities. The effects of this have resulted in disputes over rights to land and resources. The acts of the State Government in issuing provisional leases over native customary lands are illegal without the free prior informed consent of the Indigenous communities.

The indigenous communities are concern and they fear that they will lose their customary land which is very fundamental to their existence. There are more than 100 legal actions filed by the Indigenous communities against the plantation developers, the State Agencies and the State government in the High Courts all over Sarawak. We are deeply concern with these land rights disputes and the situation is becoming increasingly tense.

We strongly urge a moratorium on any plantation development projects and call the government to immediately bring about meaningful solutions to all these land disputes problems and land rights issues in Sarawak.

Thank you.

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Organisations Coalition:-

Jaringan Tanah Hak Adat Bangsa Asal Sarawak (TAHABAS)
Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS)
Borneo Resources Institute Malaysia (BRIMAS)
PACOS Trust Sabah (PACOS)
Persatuan Wanita Desa Sarawak (WADESA)
Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (SADIA)
SPNS & Orang Asli community Reps (Peninsula Malaysia)